DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 195 729 CE 027 283

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TITLE The Pleasures and Pitfalls of a Non-traditional Occupation.
PUB DATE 7 Dec 80
NOTE 13p.: Paper presented at the American Vocational Association Annual Convention (74th, New Orleans, LA, December 7, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adults: Attitude Change: *Employee Attitudes: Employer Attitudes: Females: *Job Satisfaction: Labor Conditions: Males: *Nontraditional Occupations: *Participant Satisfaction: Sex Bias: *Sex Stereotypes: Vocational Adjustment: *Work Attitudes: Work Environment

ABSTRACT

Both men and women who engage in non-traditional occupations (occupations in which 80 percent or more of the participants are of the opposite sex) are generally happy with their occupational choice, according to interviews with seventy such women and ten men. The women, however, experienced more discrimination and sexual harassment, while the men reported no more adverse reactions than mild surprise. But the women felt the benefits of good pay, job security, chance for advancement, and job satisfaction outweighed the negative effects. While the women agreed that it is likely that more and more women will be getting into such fields, few of the men expected more men to participate in their field--possibly because of the low pay traditionally associated with women's fields. While women felt more satisfaction in their occcupations than their male counterparts, both men and women said they hope that attitudes are changing and that sex stereotyped occupations will soon be a thing of the past. Such a development would make the term "non-traditional" obsolete. (KC)

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THE PLEASURES AND PITFALLS OF A NON-TRADITIONAL OCCUPATION

A Presentation Before the

Adult Education Division

American Vocational Association 74th Annual Convention

New Orleans

December 7, 1980

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CE027283

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THE PLEASURES AND PITFALLS OF A NON-TRADITIONAL OCCUPATION

We are in an era in which many of our traditions are changing. Means of doing things and ways of thinking are changing at an ever-accelerating pace. This is demonstrated in a change that has been occurring in many workplaces in the past few years. Where once there were jobs that were considered suitable for men only and others suitable only for women, things have changed. The non-traditional worker has arrived.

We consider a person to be a non-traditional worker if he or she is employed where 80% or more of his or her counterparts across the state of Kansas are of the other sex. Some examples of female non-traditional workers are carpenters, welders, truck dispatchers, or police officers. Examples of male non-traditional workers include licensed practical nurses, day care attendants, clerical workers or elementary school teachers.

We have completed some 70 interviews with non-traditional workers in Kansas. Sixty of the interviewees are women and 10 are men. There are several reasons for the difference in these numbers. First, historically there have been relatively few areas of wage earning work that have been considered "women's work", while there have been many jobs considered to be the exclusive domain of men; there are, therefore, more non-traditional jobs available for women than for men. Second, the higher salaries that go with a non-traditional job for women are attracting more of them, while the lower salaries generally offered in non-traditional jobs for men definitely constitute a negative factor.

While we have been able to draw a number of conclusions from the experiences of the women we have interviewed and to see similarities and differences between them, this is much more difficult to do with the men because of their smaller

numbers. It will seem as though we are devoting more time and attention to discussing the interviews with women non-traditional workers; that is because we are! We must recognize that, at the present time, when one talks about non-traditional workers, one is talking about a predominantly female group.

As women leave or reject traditional work roles such as secretary, telephone operator, nurse, and kindergarten teacher in favor of jobs in construction, law enforcement, appliance repair, engineering and many other fields, they are learning to deal with a set of reactions on the part of supervisors, co-workers, and loved ones that may be significantly different from what they could expect in a traditional job. In addition, they are enjoying a variety of benefits as non-traditional workers that they could not find in a traditional occupation.

The most obvious benefit for a woman non-traditional worker is a higher salary than she could make at a more traditional job, with a higher standard of living as the result. This has been mentioned as a significant factor in all but a few of our interviews. While this is an important factor to all the women we talked to, it appears especially so for those women who are single parents and/or the sole support of their families. In addition to the obvious reasons why a higher salary would be important to them, we also found that these women were more likely to have spent more time than their younger counterparts as homemakers or in low-paying, low-status traditional jobs. Many of the women indicated that they were amazed to discover how much more money they could earn in a non-traditional job; some women are earning twice as much--or even more than twice what they did before. It may be significant that the older women we talked to were more likely to have entered their non-traditional jobs because of financial need caused by

divorce, a husband going back to school, or simply a need to boost the family income in inflationary economic times. The economic rewards for them are of a more primary nature for them than for the younger women. They earn a good salary; therefore they experience satisfaction from the job. The younger women were more likely to view doing the job as the most satisfying element, with the salary as a kind of reinforcement. This difference may be due to the older women's heavier added responsibilities and greater experience with the sometimes harsh economic facts of life.

Also cited as important incentives were more job security and better employee benefits. Male-dominated occupations are much more likely to have strong union representation than traditional women's jobs. Many women mentioned their unions as a definite plus in their decision to seek a non-traditional career and advised that women interested in a non-traditional occupation to seriously study the union representation in that field. Greater opportunities for advancement in non-traditional roles is another attraction, as many women see a non-traditional job as less likely to be on a narrow dead-end track. Another motivating factor is the chance to learn new skills and improve them over an extended period of time. Many of the women mentioned that it gave them a great deal of satisfaction to learn skills and perform tasks that they had been told were too taxing, too difficult, or too dirty for them. While some reported a feeling of confidence from the start that they could do the job, others noted that they were surprised to learn that not only could they repair washing machines or drive an 18-wheeler or repair telephone lines, they could excel at the job.

A positive reaction from "significant others" in the life of the female non-traditional worker appears to be an important, though more secondary, element. Those who were married generally reported a favorable reaction from their husbands. "My husband brags about what I do," one said. Some of the younger married women we talked to indicated that they had gone into a job similar to their husbands' and that they thought their husbands were more supportive to their efforts because they understood more of what the job involved. Older married women mentioned their husbands infrequently, if at all.

Several of the younger, unmarried women reported that, while their parents had been surprised by their job choice, they were nevertheless supportive of the endeavor; others felt that their parents were discouraging, but that they had won them over to a more supportive view by their success.

These women have proved to others that they can do the job, and more significantly, they have proved to themselves that they can do the job. They have learned a number of new skills and they have more money in their pockets to show for it. As a result, they experience greatly increased feelings of self-esteem and self-satisfaction. They appear to have abundance of self confidence that comes with the meeting of a challenge and the accomplishment of personal goals.

The pleasures of non-traditional employment for men appear to be fewer in number and less obvious, as well. The men we interviewed were at times hard-pressed to name specific good points of being a male non-traditional worker. Some Some of the men we interviewed were unfamiliar with the term and were not altogether comfortable with it. Unlike some fields such as secretarial or

nursing, their job titles did not have connotations as "women's jobs" even though there are in fact only a small number of mem employed in their capacities. They had not found anything particularly unusual about being the only men employed in their positions at their workplaces. The other men we talked to were quite well aware of their minority status.

One man we interviewed, a high school home economics teacher, had come to his job after years as a hotel and restaurant manager; he perceived the change as a chance to leave the "rat race" and enjoy a less pressured environment, as aspect of the job which he viewed as far more important than the substantial decrease in salary he also experienced. He also noted that for him, being the only man at statewide meetings is ". . . an ego trip, because you're the only one of a kind there and a lot of conversation is made and asked of you . . . ." He noted that because his women colleagues reacted positively to his presence, he enjoyed being the only male.

Some men in non-traditional fields believe that their chances for advancement may be greater because they are male and they see this as a positive element. There may be some truth to this, particularly in fields like elementary education where traditionally men have advanced to administrative and supervisory positions even though there are many more women than men employed in the field. A male secretary noted that if he were moved into a supervisory position he thought he would be more sensitive towards women who worked under him as a result of having been in the situation himself; he saw his increased sensitivity toward his female colleagues as a positive result of his non-traditional employment.

Most of the women we interviewed felt pressured to some degree to perform especially well on the job because of their non-traditional status. Most reported that they felt they were supervised more closely and compared more stringently to experienced workers than a new male employee would be. Some thought that this changed with time on the job; others did not find this to be the case.

A significant difference between younger and older women is in the way they react to negative attitudes on the part of male supervisors and co-workers. The older women seem to be much more tolerant of negative attitudes and tend to take upon themselves the responsibility for changing these attitudes. They are hopeful that their work performance and behavior on the job would ultimately result in a change, and they seem willing to wait patiently for this to happen. The younger women perceive that their male co-workers are insisting on hanging on to stereotyped ideas that are inaccurate and unfair, and they think that the responsibility for bringing about changes rests with the men who hold the attitudes rather than with themselves. They are more likely to protest what they consider a form of sexual harrassment. In addition, the older women seemed more concerned that their male co-workers like them; this was much less important to the younger women.

Younger and older women are in agreement that a woman who holds a job which has been viewed as a "man's job" is expected to work harder, perform better, and be more conscientious than her male co-workers. Several of the women noted that when a man cannot perform some aspect of a job, he is just one individual who cannot do it; but when a woman cannot perform some aspect of a job, this becomes

a generalized belief that no woman can do it. Women non-traditional workers generally do not foresee a significant change in these attitudes in the near future, and feel that any woman who wants a non-traditional career must be prepared to deal with them or make another occupational choice.

In discussing how they got their jobs, some of the women said that they thought being female was a positive element in their being hired; they cited affirmative action programs most frequently as the reason. Others thought it was neither a positive nor a negative factor. A few women reported that they were hired only after repeated and persistent contact with their eventual employers. One woman stated that she thought she was hired only because the management was sure she would fail and her failure would serve as a reason not to hire any more women. She has since been promoted to a supervisory capacity!

Working conditions for women non-traditional workers vary. Many non-traditional jobs are in work areas that can be dirty, noisy, uncomfortable, or dangerous. Some women work out of doors in all kinds of weather; others must work unusual hours or on rotating shifts. Some faced the possibility of seasonal lay-offs. The non-traditional women workers we interviewed did not consider these factors to be real drawbacks, however. Those who worked outside generally preferred it to being inside all day and noted that they quickly adjusted to it. Several women compared their jobs to homemaking, noting that they did not find their jobs as welders or appliance repair technician or telephone repair specialists any dirtier or more taxing. Those who had to contend with the possibility of job-related injury were acceptant of this as an aspect of the job which one had to expect. Many of the women noted that generally

non-traditional jobs are not "glamourous"; they had learned to forego make-up, nail polish, elaborate hairdos and such on the job.

Some of the women did not have any training prior to beginning their non-traditional employment and did not think this was a handicap if they received on-the-job instruction of some kind. Some returned to school after starting work in order to enhance or increase their skills. Interestingly, several of the younger women who had sought industrial training reported that they were discouraged from enrolling in industrial training courses by school administrators and/or teachers. One woman reported that she lost several friends as a result of seeking vocational training in high school. Often they were the only female in the class and faced harassment and put-downs from the other students. None of these women, however, reported that she seriously considered discontinuing her training as a result. They did agree that potential non-traditional students should be aware of these attitudes and advised that they not let others dissuade them from their chosen career fields.

Women who had contact with the public reported a range of responses, from surprise to disbelief to outright animosity. An appliance repair technician reported that she had been refused entry to houses, had been propositioned, and had been asked to call for a male repair technician to check her work. An avionics repair specialist said that many telephone callers assume she is a secretary and insist that she call a man to the phone. Similarly, a male secretary noted that callers often assume he is the boss when he answers the phone. He did not note any negative reaction on the part of the callers when he explains, however. An auto body repair person said that people are amazed

to see her in the shop at all, let alone working on their cars. A police officer said people are initially surprised, but often seem more willing to talk to her than to her male colleagues. There is an obvious element of pride for these women in proving to the doubters that they are indeed capable of doing the jobs they have committed themselves to doing.

For men, the single biggest drawback in non-traditional employment is low pay. This was mentioned consistently in the course of our interviews, although no man that we talked to made a direct connection between the low salary and the fact that his job was usually considered "women's work"; women in these fields have been quite well aware for some time that low pay and "women's work" go hand in hand.

Interestingly, none of the men we talked to had experienced negative attitudes or remarks on the part of supervisors or co-workers as a reaction to his non-traditional role, although a clerk-typist noted that people joked about it in a lighthearted manner. It appears that women are more accepting of males working in their traditional work places than men are of females working alongside them. None of the men reported having experienced incidents of sexual harassment or put-downs because he does a "woman's job." One said, "...it's something that they've just taken in stride, and to get the work done is the main thing and everyone's basically sensible about that, and whether you're a man or a woman doesn't seem to make such difference." An executive secretary claimed, however, in speaking of male supervisors, that "most of them expect the male to do a little bit more" than they would expect of a female secretary. Another male secretary thought that male supervisors tend to

be more acceptant of assertive behavior on his part than they would of assertive behavior by a female secretary.

Some of the men perceived a lack of job status in the eyes of their social peers. A young day-care attendant who indicated he was satisfied with his job and planned to continue in it nevertheless reported that, when asked about his work, he calls himself an early childhood educator rather than a day-care attendant, because he feels it sounds like a higher status job and he is less likely to get a negative reaction.

It is abundantly clear, from the interviews we have done with female non-traditional workers, that the pleasures--the higher salary, the increased self confidence and self esteem, and the greater job security and benefits, the better possibilities of advancement, the new skills learned, and the chance to prove to others and themselves that they can do the job--far outweigh the pitfalls. They clearly feel that the continuing job discrimination, the sexual harassment, and the negative attitudes can be overcome, and that dirty, uncomfortable or possibly dangerous working conditions are a small price to pay for all the positive benefits, both professional and personal, which they feel they receive. Of all the women we have interviewed, only one said she would rather be working at a more traditional job, if only she could find one that paid as well as her non-traditional job. Many noted that their only regret was in not getting into their present job sooner. One young woman summed it all up when she said, "It's the best thing I ever did."

The men we interviewed did not appear to experience such a strong reaction to their non-traditional jobs, either in terms of their personal reaction to

the job or the reaction of others to them as non-traditional workers. They did not seem to experience either the highs or the lows that the women reported. While the women emphatically agreed that it is likely that more and more women will be getting into jobs which until now have been considered suitable for men only, one one man was hopeful that more men would get into his field. While the women clearly have more obstacles to overcome in non-traditional jobs than the men do, they also experience more satisfaction and greater self fulfillment through their jobs than do their male counterparts. The women's sense of satisfaction with the job is apparently related to the feelings of accomplishment at having overcome the difficulties, an experience which the men do not seem to share.

The point at which there is not distinction between "men's jobs" and "women's jobs" is a long way off, but the people we have interviewed are helping to point us in that direction. One said, "To break it down into women doing this, and men doing that.... I hope that attitude's changing, because everybody, man or woman, has the potential to do whatever they want, whatever they feel they can do." Another said, "...too much has been made that a man cannot do this or a female cannot do that, and I think it really boils down to how much...you want to achieve your goal." These thoughts, one expressed by a man and the other by a woman, are amazingly similar. Perhaps today's non-traditional workers are the first to see the common ground; and as a result of their first efforts, the very term "non-traditional" we use to describe them will someday be obsolete.